

Survivor Blues by Your Iron Lung

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Angst, Hurt-Comfort

Language: English

Characters: Billy H., Steve H.

Status: Completed

Published: 2019-08-12 17:05:26

Updated: 2019-08-12 17:05:26

Packaged: 2019-12-12 17:06:48

Rating: T

Chapters: 1

Words: 3,577

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: 'What doesn't kill you only makes you stronger' is a philosophy Billy's father has been beating into him for as long as he can remember. If you get hurt, suck it up and walk it off. Take the pain and live with it. Grow with it; let it make you a better person. Surviving the Mindflayer only makes him wish he'd died.

Survivor Blues

Surviving hurts.

Laying down, standing up; simply *existing* hurts him immeasurably. It's like he can't get comfortable anymore. Walking, talking, resting, sleeping, eating (*especially* eating) - anything and everything he does causes him more pain than he knows what to do with. But what else can he do? He's alive, after all. He *survived*.

He tries to carry on like nothing's wrong to prove a point, like, by pretending he's not in constant pain it'll somehow prove that he's still as *strong* as he used to be, but it makes it all worse. Despair creeps in with the hurt, but before it overwhelms him he adopts it; uses his pain as penance, abuses this new sick form of self-flagellation to try and convince himself that he's only getting what he deserves for all the hurt he's caused countless others.

The doctors that saved his life had told him that recovery wouldn't be easy, but still, Billy thinks, maybe he'd have been better off dying. Some days it hurts even to breathe, and if this is the way he's going to be for the rest of his life, then he hopes he lives a short one, absolution be damned.

His dad still hits him. It hurts.

For a while after he'd been released from the hospital, things had been fine at home. Tense, but no voices raised. No *hands* raised. Some semblance of peace descending upon father and son until the bills from the hospital come in and Neil just *loses* it. Rages for hours. Just yelling, at first, but eventually his hands come flying and Billy is too hurt to escape them.

It becomes routine after that, although Billy notices that his father's fist is a little bit gentler as it collides into him. Almost like he's mindful of the places he's already been hurt, as though by striking him in the places he still feels solid he's showing his son some kind of *mercy*. It could be worse. Maybe Billy should be grateful. He isn't.

Redemption is a far off dream that grows dimmer by the day whenever his father finds cause to blacken his eye.

He hears about Harrington through Max occasionally. Sees him around town sometimes when his dad drags him out. It hurts.

Part of that hurt stems from the unresolved things he did to Steve that night at the Byers' place, but most of it actually stems from the night he almost died- *should've* died. It comes from where he'd been lying prone on the floor of the Starcourt Mall, bleeding out corrupted, blackened blood with Max crying over him. He couldn't move his head after being impaled by so many cruel appendages, but even as his gaze had been fixed firmly upwards, he'd seen that pretty, pretty face of Steve's looking down at him from over the railing of one of the upper floors. If Billy remembers right (and he does), Steve had appeared stricken. Horrorstruck and dumbfounded. Billy pictures that look of terror on his face and feels his chest constrict painfully, because whenever he sees Harrington around town these days, he looks happy. Content. Like nothing ever happened. It pains him to see that he's somehow made his life livable despite the things he's seen, but it hurts more when he realizes Steve doesn't ever look his way, even though he knows, he *must* know that Billy is near.

They hadn't been friends before any of this, but rather, they'd been close to being *something more*.

It feels like he has nothing left to live for. It hurts.

He makes a list one day and runs down all the things he used to take stock in before his flaying and can't find one single thing that stands up. His looks? Ruined; his body riddled with deep, ugly scars and a stomach devastated by irreversible chemical damage that leaves him barely able to eat anything. His car? Totaled beyond repair when Harrington had to T-bone into it to save those kids' lives (and even the *memory* of that hurts). His friends? Tommy H. had gotten out of Hawkins while the getting was good and took Carol with him; probably the only smart thing he'd ever done in his life. High school was over, the crown he'd usurped passed on to the next sniveling bastard in line who wanted to be king.

He's bitter when he comes to terms with the fact that he has *nothing*. Has no one. Can't even tolerate looking himself in the mirror to see what being flayed has done to him. He's too thin. Torn. Unrecognizable and dead around the eyes, haunted by the things his handler made him do.

His gaze is drawn to the necklace that keeps his Saint medal close to his heart and hates the way that it hangs heavily around his neck. It gets heavier every time he remembers it's there until finally it feels like the chain it's looped on is digging into his skin. He takes it off when he can't stand it any longer; doesn't think ol' Saint Christopher can do anything to help him anymore. Hasn't helped him in a long time, actually, when he thinks about it.

He almost kills himself one night. Accidentally, but still as an indirect result of all the accumulated traumas and hurts he's still struggling to contend with months later. It feels good for once.

Max finds him, of all people. Walks right into his room without knocking to ask if he's seen something of hers she just can't seem to find but knows is in the house somewhere. She stops talking as soon as she sees him splayed out on his bed, foamy vomit trickling out of his mouth, empty bottles of beer littering the floor and a stomach full of prescribed pain medications that *don't fucking work*.

"It wasn't on purpose, it just never stops hurting. They don't help," he tells her later, after his ruined stomach gets pumped and his dad wails on him for that added cost to his already large hospital tab. "*Nothing* works. I thought maybe more would."

She looks at him differently after that. No longer cold. No longer calculated; just thoughtful. Contemplative, but not in the same way where, in the past, she'd had to tread on eggshells around him or he'd hurt her in much the same way Neil hurts him. She becomes surprisingly loyal after that, even after all he's done to her- done to her *friends*- and that hurts.

She becomes the support he hadn't realized he needs. Convinces him to try the recommended physical therapy to hopefully get to a place where it doesn't hurt for him to simply *exist* anymore.

"I'll get a job," she promises him, knowing full well that whatever place willing to hire a 15 year old won't pay nearly enough to cover the cost of continual therapy sessions. "We all can; we didn't know how to help you before, so we didn't, and I'm sorry, Billy, we were so *scared*- but we know what we can do for you now. We can help you."

Her words hurt. At first because she's confirmed for him what he's suspected all along: that they hadn't even *tried* to help him, but before that old semblance of anger he used to rely on can surface, she's hugging him, and he realizes that the hurt this time comes from a place of emotional vulnerability too deep within him to pinpoint exactly.

It hurts, is the bottom line- but this time it's a good kind of hurt. The kind that has him hugging her back.

Slowly, he begins to heal. The pain doesn't lessen, but other things he hadn't realized were hurt begin to mend.

He gets to know her friends; manages to apologize to Lucas for all the shitty things he's said and done specifically to him. In turn, they begin to help him, but all the paper routes, lawn mowing gigs, and occasional pet sitting opportunities they take up don't really amount to much in the long run.

But he still continues healing.

They try to recruit the teens. Nancy gives what she can, but most of the money she makes goes towards traveling costs so she can continue to see Jonathan without having to rely on her parents. Billy refuses to take her money anyway; he's not a *goddamned charity case*, but unbeknownst to him she puts what she can afford to spare in Mike's hand for him anyway. Not that she'd had anything to do with what happened to him, but some people are just good at heart- something Billy hasn't had a whole lot of experience with.

They don't hear back from Harrington.

It helps. He heals. It's close, but it's not enough.

He still hurts.

They all struggle to get him through the initial assessment appointment with a therapist, and it doesn't go well. Billy hates it; hates the fact that he has to rely on other people for the betterment of himself, but he doesn't want to squander all the hard work those damnable kids are doing for him. It drains him. It drains their funds. He doesn't know what to say when the secretary asks what day she can schedule his next appointment for. He almost tells her 'never', but settles for 'same time next week' when Max takes his hand in hers and looks up at him with that determined, patented Mad Max gleam in her eye.

She knows as well as he does that they won't be able to raise enough money in time for it, but he goes anyway when 'same time next week' inevitably rolls around. Somehow, miraculously, he's able to afford it. When he asks Max how that's possible, she stays suspiciously quiet. A mysterious benefactor has started funding his therapy visits, he realizes.

He hates it. The knowledge that he can't know who he's become indebted to hurts what's left of his pride.

Weeks pass and the results of his therapy visits manifest in little ways. He can take deep breaths without his chest and lungs constricting too sharply. It doesn't hurt as much to walk. On good days he can even laugh without that deep pain blowing up inside him. Not that he laughs all that much anymore.

Max remains quiet whenever he asks her who's doing this for him.

"A friend," is all she says whenever he tries to corner her about it.

"I don't have any friends," he informs her, to which she shrugs and replies, "You have one."

He heals. Day by day as he learns the exercises, he heals. But still he wonders *who*.

Who the hell cares about him that much to help him? Not Neil. Not Susan. Max was already doing her best for him, but her best wasn't enough. To think that someone out there could care so much about his recovery leaves him feeling oddly funny. He both likes and dislikes it.

The mystery doesn't stay unsolved for long.

When school starts again, Max can't go with him to his appointments anymore. She becomes afraid that he won't go if someone doesn't go with him to make sure he does (and she might be right about that), and arranges for someone else to take him but declines to say *who*.

He waits outside on the porch for them, smoking lazily now that it doesn't hurt him to breathe in deeply anymore. Sunglasses on even though it's overcast because that fucking *thing* left its aversion of sunlight in him when it died. Coat on, collar up. Trying to reclaim the air of confidence he used to live by even if he doesn't quite fill out his clothes like he used to anymore.

He waits until he sees his ride pull up to the curb in front of his house. He lets his cigarette smolder on his lips, lets it burn right down to the filter before he flicks it away as he belatedly comes to understand just who has been helping him.

Harrington honks at him, pokes his head out the window and says, "Shake a leg, Hargrove, let's get a move on."

Billy wants to be angry. Wants to be obstinate just because he *can*, but he's tired and only has so many spoons left to get through the day with. He goes with him without much of a fuss, but has about a hundred things he wants to say to him as they ride.

It hurts that he can't get any of them out.

Recovery is a slow process.

The drives to his therapist aren't long, but there's still room enough to hold a conversation if they ever chose to do so. They don't.

Neither one of them is able to say anything to the other for days until Steve finally takes the initiative to breach that wide, wide gap that didn't used to be between them.

"So... I've been seeing a guy," he starts, side-eying Billy as he speaks to take stock in his expression.

They're stuck at a red light that hasn't turned green for two minutes. It's divine. It's torture.

It hurts.

"That's... nice," Billy says slowly, unsure of what Steve's getting at. If it's relationship advice, he has nothing to give.

"No! No, not like, uh, not like *that*," Steve stutters. Drums his fingers against the steering wheel. Nervous. "Not that there's anything... *wrong* with that, but, no. Not like that."

"Okay."

"More like, *your* kinda guy."

"My kinda guy," Billy repeats dully.

The light remains red.

"Yeah, like, y'know," Steve continues, still nervous, face colouring with embarrassment. Still waiting for that light to change. "A therapist, but, like, for my brain, or whatever."

"A psychiatrist?"

Steve winces at the word, looks away, and rubs the back of his neck.

"Yeah. A psych."

"Okay," Billy says again. He doesn't know where Steve's trying to take this. A show of solidarity? Some sort of admission?

Steve's quiet for a moment up until the light finally, blessedly, turns green. The car lurches awkwardly forward in Steve's enthusiasm to

get going.

"Yeah, so, I've been seeing a guy." His fingers never stop tapping, playing out the rhythm of his anxieties. "And we've been talking uh, a lot about you."

"Me?" He's surprised, then, suspicious. "Why?"

"You keep me up at night."

But before Billy can ask what the hell *that* means, they're there, and Steve's already wishing him good luck.

He's lying in bed later that night, reveling in the fact that it no longer hurts to do so when Max knocks and enters. She's holding something big and boxy in her hand and looks kind of confused about it. A little awkward.

"It's for you," she says and waits for him to sit up and take the bulky two-way radio from her.

"What?" he asks stupidly, turning it over in his hands.

Max shrugs. "He said he wanted to talk to you."

"Who?"

"See for yourself. Give it back when you're done," she says, and then leaves.

He waits to hear her footsteps pattering down the hall, back to her room, before he presses down on the communication button uncertainly.

"That you, Harrington?"

"Don't cream yourself. Yeah, it's me."

A ghost of a smile works its way across Billy's face at the familiar words. He takes a seat on the side of his bed, holds the radio close to where his medallion used to hang.

"I'm sorry I couldn't do this in person," Steve says, his voice coming through in crackles and static. Still legible. Still determined. Billy ignores the pounding of his heart. "When I said that you keep me up at night, what I meant was..."

Billy hears him sigh before trying to finish his thought.

"What I meant was that I kept seeing your body on the floor at the mall whenever I closed my eyes, and not being able to do anything about it. I started having dreams where you actually fucking died or some shit and I got all fucked up about it when I remembered how close we were to being-well, you know. But I couldn't figure out why that kept happening; it's not like any of that shit was my fault, right?"

"No," Billy agrees, swallowing hard. "Wasn't your fault."

He thinks he can hear Steve exhale a sigh of relief.

"Yeah, so, I don't know why but it just kept sticking with me. I started losing sleep because you were always there. I didn't even know you were involved at all until-"

"Until I tried to kill those kids." Billy finishes his sentence for him, trying his best to ignore the lump forming in his throat as he says it.

"That wasn't you," Steve says quickly, and gives Billy a moment to collect himself. "It wasn't. But, I thought maybe if I just, I don't know, avoided you, then maybe the nightmares would stop."

A slight blossom of anger. He quickly discards it; that's not what they need right now. "Did they?"

"No."

The lump in his throat doesn't go away. He swallows it down, but then it grows and starts to take up space in his chest. It pushes down the anger, and pushes the hurt he's been internalizing up and out. His eyes grow wet. He blinks the tears back.

"I ignored you for so long," Steve says in a hushed whisper.

"I know," Billy replies and tries to keep the hurt that's threatening to

bubble out of his throat down.

"And then Max told me you tried to kill yourself-"

Steve's voice catches, and Billy can hear the hurt that starts spilling out of him. He's *crying*. Billy sniffs and stops blinking his own tears back.

"It was an accident," he tries to tell him, but his voice gives out part-way through. "It was an accident," he repeats as he clears his throat. Hot tears begin to streak down the sides of his face. "I didn't mean to."

"I didn't know what to do. I tried to talk to Robin but she said she couldn't do for me what a therapist could, but I've always heard that that shits for crazy people, and I'm not crazy, just miserable and then Max came to talk to me about you again and I just. Saw my chance, I guess."

Billy holds the radio in one hand and his head in the other. He can feel a headache coming on. Steve rambles on, about how the guilt he feels manifests the horrific visions of Billy lying dead on the ground in that shitty mall and how his shrink suggested that maybe just *talking* to Billy about it might help.

"I could've killed you that night," Steve says at the end of his rant, sniffing uncontrollably. His voice sounds hoarse, but at least they've both stopped crying. *"I almost drove right into you."*

"You kinda did. Eye for an eye, though. Guess that makes us equal," Billy replies, and Steve laughs.

His laugh is cheery despite the dark tones of their conversation. Light. It lifts Billy up.

"It could've been way worse, though."

"Yeah," Billy agrees, breathing deeply. His eyes feel crusty with dried tears. He wipes at them and feels how sore they are. "Yeah, you could've missed. You wouldn't be so sorry if you had."

Steve gets really quiet at that. Billy knows that Steve knows he's right. He would've killed them if Steve hadn't done what he did, but

it doesn't change the fact that it hurt the both of them when he'd had to resort to such drastic measures.

"But I didn't."

"No, you didn't."

"You survived."

"So did you."

"Fuck it. I miss you, Billy. I wasted so much time trying to get over the part of you I thought had died."

They stay up all night after that. Just talking. Catching up, making amends. Healing.

The conversation only ends when Billy realizes Steve's fallen asleep on his end. He'd been slowing down gradually as the hours passed, so it doesn't come as a surprise, but still Billy wishes they could've talked more.

And they can, he understands. They can talk the whole rest of their lives away if they wanted to, because they *survived*. He sets the radio down on the floor beside his bed and slips in between the sheets. He closes his eyes and smiles. They survived.

When he wakes up, he realizes he no longer hurts.